

# Les cinq cents millions de la Bégume

Jules Verne

October 14–30, 2018

I read the book when I was a child. Twelve or so maybe. I was very fond of the books by Jules Verne, especially the one of the mysterious island with its modern retelling of the Robinson Crusoe myth. I was also charmed by 'Around the World in Eighty Days' and read most of what I could lay my hands on by Verne, including the more obscure works. The millions of Begum must probably be counted in that family, as it is hardly a title most people think of when prompted by the name Verne.

When my son decided to apply for the French division in high-school I gave him the book in French to read (swim or sink) which he did readily, although formally it was too advanced for him. In fairness I must admit that he also had access to my old Swedish translation, and as a result he realized, much to his initial shock and subsequent amusement, that it was less the case of a regular reasonably faithful translation than a retelling. The so called translator had taken great liberties in making the book accessible to young people (which may very well have been acknowledged in the Swedish edition.).

Now what do I remember of the book more than fifty years later? I remember the expression of mathematical precision (in the sense of pedantry), a term which my mother at the time took exception to, physicists are precise, but hardly mathematicians. The main plot of the sharing a huge inheritance I recall of course, one to go for a construction of a model city by the French doctor and philanthropist, which intrigued me a lot, and one to the German rival to make weapons of mass destruction, in the city of steel (*La cité de l'acier*). I did not recall though that the latter was bent upon the actual destruction of the former. And in fact when rereading it I am surprised to find out that so little of the book is devoted to the model city of France-Ville, and that the main villain Schultze is bent upon its destruction is another thing that completely vanished from my mind, although it provides the basic element of suspension. But suspension was not what I looked for in the novels of Jules Verne, but their display of ingenious imagination. But there are further isolated details that stick in my mind. Such as the reference to the taste of the villain Schultze for 'sauerkraut' and 'wurst'<sup>1</sup> but more to the point to an Atlas which showed almost every bush in the world (but not (yet) the two cities). This intrigued me, the idea of such a detailed Atlas at such necessarily large scale, as I was at the time fascinated by maps and the larger scaled the better, because somehow it made you own and control the world. I also remember from the book that when the hero Marcel Bruckmann (note his German name) worked with Schultze, he always made sure to manipulate his boss, in particular to make sure that any good idea he had, he would make it seem to have originated from his employer. I found that very sophisticated and also a little bit shocking, as a child is not used to such cynicism. But maybe most importantly and influentially, it was also in this

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<sup>1</sup> Still to this day I associate that dish, of which the Alsations are famous, to the culinary taste of the German villain

book I learned about the Franco-Prussian war for the first time, as the main protagonist had taken part in it defending his father-land and in the process sharing the humiliation that this beloved part of France was lost to the Germans. In fact this book was written a few years later after this total debacle, and much of the plot (and message) of the novel no doubt stems from the bitterness Verne felt as to the loss of the province. This stayed with me for many years, and I was surprised when I got older and learned more about the recent history<sup>2</sup>, that the Alsatians would have felt such a loyalty to France, were they not closer to the Germans culturally as well as linguistically.

Now Verne bristled with the loss of Alsace (and Lorraine) and in fact this was probably the bitterest loss and humiliation the French ever felt and which figured very much in their idea of making the First World War turn out to be if not a revenge at least a redress. It did not exactly turn out that way, but it goes a long way to explain the intransigence of Clemenceau at the peace talks. That those talks took place in Versailles was not a coincidence as we all know, it was in Versailles that the German unification formally took place. Ironically the debacle of the Second World War did not leave the French with the same hatred of the Germans as the Franco-Prussian and First World War had engendered. In fact, although they are understandably reluctant to admit it, the French got on well with the German occupiers, and most of the activity of the so called 'Resistance' took place retroactively in the lofty realms of the self-serving imagination. The Germans were at least fellow Europeans, and the French in general were treated well<sup>3</sup> and with the standards of a Nazi occupation it was indeed a tea party. The resentment against the American liberators went deeper<sup>4</sup> and it was not surprising that it did not take much time before there was a rapprochement between De Gaulle and Adenauer. Admittedly Adenauer was a good German, as far from a Prussian one could imagine<sup>5</sup> in fact from the Rhine district, the inhabitants of which, in the minds of the cultured French, were more French in spirit than German<sup>6</sup>.

To return to the novel. What strikes me as an adult reader, almost sixty years later than my first encounter, is the deep distaste that Verne harbors against the Germans. I suspect that this predates the Franco-Prussian war, and that no Vernian heroes are

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<sup>2</sup> it is sobering to think that when I was a child there were still eye-witnesses to this war alive!

<sup>3</sup> which can explain that so many French Jews survived, sheltered by the local population, not intimidated to the same extent as elsewhere

<sup>4</sup> One can argue that the Americans caused more material damage to the French than did the Germans, wittingly and unwittingly. As an example of the latter one can point to all the plane trees which are being cut down in southern France, especially along Canal du Midi, due to a disease that has been traced to American ammunition boxes. Once when we stayed at a 'table d'hôte' in Normandy, the owners spoke bitterly, more than sixty years later, about the havoc the Americans had caused.

<sup>5</sup> It is recounted that when Adenauer was forced to travel to Berlin he turned down the blinds in his compartment as to be saved the sight of Prussian lands

<sup>6</sup> One may wonder what to do with Goebbels. Unlike most of the Nazi brass he was of Rhenish stock, and indeed when it came to artistic taste he was far more sophisticated than his comrades. One may in the same vein argue that he was not a Nazi in heart, that he did not believe in the lies of his ministry, just finding it good fun and an artistic challenge. One may speculate what is morally most incriminating as opposed to intellectually.

allowed to be German, although there are plenty of Americans and English cast in those rôles. Nowadays you have to be very careful in exhibiting such blatant expressions of xenophobia, but it was different in the more liberal climate of the 19th century. Yet his depiction of the villainy of Schultze becomes almost prophetic as indicating what at least some Germans would be capable of in the future. Schultze is a militarist obsessed with the idea of more and more powerful weapons of mass destruction and how he revels in dreams about exterminating whole cities of innocent inhabitants (one example being of course France-Ville), and his insatiable lust for world-dominion. Who knows, Hitler may very well have read the book in his childhood and derived some inspiration secretly siding with the villain<sup>7</sup>.

Now the dramatic climax of the book is when Schultze's cannon ball is fired at the city and Bruckmann realizes that the ball has such a velocity that instead of hitting and destroying the city it is bound to overshoot its goal and become a satellite. And indeed, it is shown to cross the sky ending up doing no harm. Schultze for all his cleverness must have forgotten that the Earth is not flat but curved and 'falls away'. This resolution reminds you of a similar trick in 'Around the World in Eighty days' concerning Philaes Phogg failing to initially realize that through his journey in the eastern direction he did gain a whole day, and the realization of his mistake makes him only at the very last moment claim his bet. But nothing of that I remember from my first reading of Begum.

As a book it has many obvious flaws, one being the actual power of money, which he seems to have exaggerated in the same naive way people extol the benefits of saving over long durations<sup>8</sup>. It is indeed quite a lot from the perspective of a single individual concerned with the usual quotidian consumption and I tend to recall yet another detail from the book, of how a man endowed with such a plenty would not be able to disperse with it during a life time, even if he gave away a franc a second. But when it comes to collective efforts, such sums are indeed paltry and non-consequential.

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<sup>7</sup> but most likely what may have fired the youthful imagination of Hitler the most may have been the books on Indians by Karl May, just as those books were also the favorites of Einstein as a child, along with millions of young people all over Europe. When I was a child books on Indians were still very popular, but now they seem to have gotten out of favor. Who plays Indians and Cowboys anymore? Still every summer there are celebrations in the north German town of Bad Segeberg, where May was born.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed if you would put in some minute amount of money at the time of the beginning of our Christian time reckoning, it would indeed have reached a considerable amount by now, due to compound interest. But what is the moral of the story other than that sustained exponential growth is an absurdity?